

# ELKO DAILY FREE PRESS

---

**MONDAY MAY 2, 2005** Last modified: *Saturday, April 30, 2005 3:22 PM PDT*

## **Mines & Mercury: Idaho group may sue EPA over emissions**

**By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer**

ELKO - Idaho Conservation League is mulling over whether to work with Nevada on reducing mercury emissions from gold processing plants or sue the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency - or do both.

"We haven't filed yet. We want to talk among ourselves to see if we can work with Nevada without a suit," Justin Hayes, program director for the league, said Friday.

"We would be suing EPA for failure to ensure sufficient regulations to limit mercury emissions from gold mines in Nevada," he said.

"The bottom line is we want results. We want the problem fixed. We will probably approach it on a couple of different routes, the suit and working with the mining companies and agencies," Hayes said.

Nevada Division of Environmental Protection believes its voluntary program is working and is the way to go, rather than force EPA to establish certain standards.

EPA doesn't have a federal standard for mercury emissions from mining operations.

NDEP Administrator Leo Drozdoff said the partners in the state's voluntary program "believe in the program and recognize a need for further reductions in emissions, greater involvement in the program and an even better program than we have today."

Jerritt Canyon

As an example of the program's success, Queenstake Resources Ltd. reported that mines north of Elko at Jerritt Canyon have reduced mercury emissions 90 percent since 2001 data.

The baseline data in 2001 showed Jerritt Canyon emitted 7,980 pounds of mercury a year, and the latest figures, for 2003, show the emissions at 798 pounds per year, said Teresa Conner, manager of environmental resources for the mine.

NDEP cited a report EPA published in December 2004 that states industry officials reported mercury emissions had been reduced 40 percent in the state.

NDEP worked with EPA to set up the voluntary program in 2002, and the program participants are currently reviewing the data and planning the next step, since the agreement expires this year.

"As we're doing this, the ICL folks have decided they want to engage in the process," Drozdoff said

Friday.

NDEP officials put together a meeting for Hayes this week with those involved in the Voluntary Mercury Reduction Program to talk about the program.

"We're focusing on Nevada because mercury coming out of northern Nevada may be of large enough quantity to be affecting Idaho," Hayes said.

Mercury in fish

He said the State of Idaho has issued a warning to the public that it has tested fish in Salmon Falls Creek near Jackpot and "found them to be quite high in mercury."

That's one incident involving Idaho creeks, according to Hayes.

"When we started looking around, the most suspect sources are the gold mining facilities in northern Nevada," Hayes said.

"The stuff we're concerned about is the mercury evaporated during processing," he said. "It can go into the atmosphere and go over Idaho."

"Mercury is one of the most toxic pollutants. ... Too much can kill you, and exposure can cause neurological problems," Hayes said.

Mercury is naturally occurring in gold ore.

Nevada's attention was drawn to mercury emissions and how to reduce them when the EPA began issuing toxic release inventories that included hard-rock mines for the first time. That led to the state program.

The four companies that signed the agreement with NDEP are Queenstake, Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc., Cortez Gold Mines and Newmont Mining Corp., which all have mines in northern Nevada.

The mining firms support the voluntary program.

"We're in full support of the voluntary mercury program," Jerriitt Canyon's general manager, Nigel Bain, said Friday. "We've been able to get big decreases in emissions at the site."

"We think it's a good program. It's very successful," said Newmont spokesman Doug Hock.

New technology

Mike Elges, chief of NDEP's Bureau of Air Pollution Control, said Friday a key reason why the agency supports a voluntary program is that without a maximum achievable control technology standard from EPA, mining companies are free to pursue the latest in technology to reduce mercury emissions.

He said even three years ago there wasn't the reliable technology there is today to reduce mercury emissions, such as improved scrubbers that can target mercury.

"A voluntary program encourages flexibility in technology, and will yield the greater reductions in the long run," Elges said.

"Each mine has a different type of processing. They are able to tailor the systems toward their operations," said Colleen Cripps, chief of NDEP's Bureau of Air Quality Planning.

Drozdoft said NDEP will look at expanding the program beyond the four mining companies.

NDEP spokeswoman Cindy Petterson said those attending the meeting with Hayes this week included

several NDEP officials, Glenn Miller, a professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, and a member of Great Basin Mine Watch, a representative of the environmental organization Earthworks and a representative from Barrick Goldstrike Mines.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --